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Where Should Vegetables Be Grown?

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Where Should Vegetables Be Grown?

This is going to be a mostly myopic dissertation since it will be dealing primarily with the United States. This is not to say that I do not recognize that vegetables are grown on all continents except Antarctica. In fact, what is typed here can probably be applied in the broadest sense to all growing areas where transportation of vegetables to market is a concern. The United States includes four time zones. Moving tomatoes from California to New York, and points in between, is no easy task. That is not to say that tomatoes cannot be grown in New York, it just that they cannot be grown throughout the year. Just to show that I am not completely oblivious to conditions in other countries that do not stretch across time zones, I understand that problems of distance north to south can be as daunting as going east to west. Sometimes the problem of transportation over relatively short distances precludes economic intercourse.

Transportation has always been the major problem when perishable commodities are moved between places. Some crops need to be refrigerated, some need to be kept dry; many need to be picked immature and ripened near the destination. The increasing cost of fuel will likely further exacerbate movement of vegetables over distances, and when they get to the destination it is going to be more expensive to buy them. This has implications for nutrition. Vegetables are repositories of a bunch of good stuff for the human diet. The USDA, the agency I work for, has a Gleaner Program where unused crops grown in experimental plots are donated to the community. These crops do not have dangerous chemicals associated

with them nor are they substandard. They are the data not counted and the produce of the guard rows that are not counted in the data. I have observed the benefits of this to a portion of the community who may not be able to afford the purchase of fresh vegetables. If you cannot buy the vegetables, you cannot consume them and you will not get the benefit of consuming them.

This brings me to the specific question concerning where vegetables should be grown in the United States. If logic was the criterion then the region where vegetables should be grown is in the middle of the country so that transportation can be facilitated to major metropolitan areas in the eastern, middle, and western parts of the country. The central region of the United States extends from subtropical Texas to almost arctic Minnesota. Okay, not really that cold, but I lived there for 3 years and it was not possible to grow vegetables cold for a good part of the year.

Theoretically, the middle part of the country could grow and deliver most vegetables either when they normally grow or at times of the year when they are not normally produced in the cooler portions of the region. There are three major problems with this scenario. Only three? Not really, but three very big problems, and those are corn, soybean, and wheat. I do not see any significant portion of those crops being displaced for vegetables. Okay, wait a minute. The area that it takes to produce vegetables for domestic consumption is not that great and will not take a great deal of land from these important field crops. As a matter of fact, the United States has historically provided the vegetable needs of the citizenry. As a population we have gotten spoiled in thinking that we should have what we want when we want it. As a result, it is the demand for more exotic vegetables, or out-of-season vegetables, e.g., tomatoes in winter, that causes problems. Those crops are either not going to be grown in the interior portion of the United States or will not be chosen over the three crops that dominate the middle portion of the country.

There is a philosophy termed "locally grown" that, over the last few years, has gained a degree of popularity. This concept has also been associated with organic production of vegetables. However, the concept does not require that locally grown vegetables have to be grown with organic practices and principles. Actually I like the concept of locally grown. We have a vegetable garden at home and there is no meaningful comparison between something grown outside the back door and that which comes from the market in town. The flavor and texture of fresh vegetables from the garden are able to be developed since the natural maturation process is allowed to run its course. Growing something in south Texas or California

during portions of the year when they cannot be grown in other parts of the country and shipping them to New York or Chicago allows the use of vegetables when they would not normally be available. Having vegetables in winter in St. Louis comes with the price of not having the optimum freshness or flavor, but it bridges the time of year until we can grow our own vegetables. I applaud those who want to make sure that consumers can obtain the freshest produce. Other than doing without when certain crops are not locally available, the other option is local greenhouse production, or purchasing crops delivered over many miles. Is there an answer to the dilemma? My answer would be to dedicate the soil we have available to crop production, not strip mall or sports stadium construction.

Getting back to the question that started this: I think that vegetables should be grown where and when they can be produced. Until there is a way to locally produce vegetables in all parts of the country at all times of the year, I think we should get them from wherever they come from until the summer rolls around and we can plant our vegetables in the backyard garden.

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